

The Russian Double Strike That Killed a U.S. Medic in Ukraine. ‘They Had Us in Sight.’

A group of medics believe they were the victims of a ‘double-tap’ attack by Russia in Bakhmut

By [James Marson](#) and Ievgeniia Sivorka

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Norwegian medics Simon Johnsen, front, and Sander Sørsveen Trelvik were injured by a missile strike while helping victims at the scene of a previous explosion in Bakhmut, Ukraine. EMANUELE SATOLLI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BAKHMUT, Ukraine—Minutes after an explosion rang out near the bus station in this [war-torn eastern city](#), a team of medics arrived to find a mangled car and an elderly woman lying wounded at the roadside.

Seconds later, a missile slammed into the volunteers’ white van, unleashing a fireball that blew the medics off their feet.

Simon Johnsen, a Norwegian, quickly came round, checked himself for injuries then ran for cover. Another Norwegian medic, his back burned and legs bloodied, screamed as he hobbled away. Four of the others also dashed for cover as Russian mortar rounds then began exploding around them.

Sprawled alongside the burned-out rescue van lay Pete Reed, a 33-year-old trained paramedic, a former U.S. Marine, a one-time ski instructor, a jokester who had devoted his recent years to treating the wounded in wars in Iraq and, now, Ukraine. He was dead.

The medics say that the Feb. 2 strike, the aftermath of which was witnessed by a team from The Wall Street Journal, was an example of a brutal tactic known as a “double tap,” where a location that has already been struck is hit again when first responders arrive. Humanitarian organizations in Syria, where Russia intervened in 2015 to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, have [long accused Moscow of using the tactic](#) to kill and maim caregivers and terrorize civilians.



A still from a video released by Frontline Medics shows medics—including Pete Reed—assisting a wounded civilian in Bakhmut moments before a missile—seen right behind their van—slammed into it, unleashing a fireball that blew them off their feet and killed Mr. Reed.
PHOTO: ERKO LAIDINEN/FRONTLINE MEDICS

“They had us in sight and were definitely waiting for medics to come,” said Mr. Johnsen. “They were shooting at civilian vehicles.”

The Russian Defense Ministry didn't respond to a request for comment. Russia has denied targeting civilians, despite extensive evidence to the contrary presented by Ukraine and its Western backers, nongovernmental organizations and media.

Mr. Reed and four others from his team were in Bakhmut that morning visiting civilian hubs that provide food, warmth and medication to the several thousand who remain in a city that was once home to some 80,000.

Mr. Reed was country director for Global Outreach Doctors, a U.S. medical organization providing humanitarian relief for those in need, coordinating with other groups on the ground to share resources, and seeking to establish a critical-care point near Bakhmut.

Mr. Reed had met the founder of GoDocs, Andrew Lustig, during the battle of Mosul in Iraq, where they bonded over efforts to treat anyone injured, from civilians to Iraqi troops to Islamic State fighters.



The spot where a team of medics came under attack while dealing with the fallout of an earlier explosion. PHOTO: EMANUELE SATOLLI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Pete doesn’t care where you’re from or which side you’re on,” Mr. Lustig said. “If you need medical help, he’s going to help you.”

It was also in Iraq in 2016 where Mr. Reed met his future wife, Alex Potter, then working as a photojournalist. She recalled in an interview how she and Mr. Reed once came under mortar fire by Islamic State in what they believed was a double-tap attack.

“It’s a pretty common tactic in every war,” said Ms. Potter.

Mr. Reed was struggling to find a job as a paramedic in Alaska, she said. Then Russia invaded Ukraine early last year, so he headed there to help.

Around midday on Feb. 2, he and his team were at a civilian hub in Bakhmut when a blast rang out close by. It was nothing unusual for the city, which Russia is trying to encircle and seize through brutal, house-to-house combat.

When the team heard there were casualties, the medics sped in that direction in their cars. Mr. Reed’s team, consisting of another American, an Australian and two Ukrainians, were in white and blue vans. Mr. Johnsen, the Norwegian medic, along with his compatriot Sander Sørsveen Trelvik and an Estonian medic, followed in a green Land Rover. The three, part of an organization called Frontline Medics, were all wearing camouflage.

The site where the explosion happened was dotted with shrapnel and at least two burned-out vehicles. They found a man cradling an injured woman on the roadside. The medics went to treat her, crouching around her body.

Seconds later, a missile slammed into the white vehicle parked just a couple of yards away. A video of the incident shot on the cellphone of Estonian medic Erko Laidinen, who had remained in the Frontline Medics’ car, shows what weapons experts identified as a Kornet antitank missile slamming into the van.

The blast knocked the medics down. Mr. Reed, who was closest to the van, was killed instantly. The two Norwegians managed to scramble away and take shelter behind a concrete block with Mr. Laidinen. The rest of Mr. Reed’s team, some of them bloodied, managed to get into their other car and speed away.



Sander Sørsveen Trelvik ran away from the scene of a strike in Bakhmut where the medic was aiding victims of a previous explosion. PHOTO: EMANUELE SATOLLI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Simon Johnsen and Sander Sørsveen Trelvik sought shelter after a missile exploded next to them. PHOTO: EMANUELE SATOLLI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Less than a minute later, a second Kornet missile tore into a nearby building, said Mr. Laidinen and Jonathan Zirkle, chief executive of Frontline Medics, who described a second video of the incident from their car's dashcam that they haven't released publicly.

Then mortar bombs started raining down on the area in a series of explosions. The three medics still on scene frantically searched for shelter in nearby houses. A Wall Street Journal team, which had just arrived there, joined the search, but found the houses locked. With mortars landing all around, the Journal team decided to pull out and took the Norwegians with them. Mr. Laidinen, who had become separated, made his own way out on foot.

"It was a big operation to murder everybody," said Mr. Laidinen. "The mortar rounds were to finish off those left behind."

Mr. Laidinen, a 35-year-old who runs a small electrical company, said he later found out that other vehicles had been destroyed on that section of road days earlier, including a military vehicle.

The direction of travel of the Kornet missile, which is laser guided and has a range of 5 miles, suggests that the Russians were able to set up a firing position on the eastern side of Bakhmut, which they are occupying, with direct line of sight to that section of road, said Mr. Laidinen and weapons experts.



Peter Reed spoke on the phone while in at an outdoor field clinic in Mosul, Iraq, in 2016, where he volunteered as a medic. PHOTO: ODD ANDERSEN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Ms. Potter, Mr. Reed's wife, heard her husband's car had been hit while she was on an overnight shift at an Alaska hospital, where she now works as a nurse. She spent hours on the phone trying to find out what happened, and eventually saw a video with what looked like her husband's body lying next to the burned-out van.

She said she knew for sure he was dead the next day, when an acquaintance identified Mr. Reed by a tattoo of a Spartan helmet, a symbol used by U.S. Marines, on his upper left arm.

Mr. Johnsen, the Norwegian medic, is recovering from his wounds, but says he plans to return to Ukraine as soon as possible. Mr. Laidinen just picked up a new ambulance in Poland and also plans to return.

"Russia is like a big fat bully beating up small skinny boys in the schoolyard," said Mr. Laidinen. "It's our place to step in. It's something I can do."

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The post [The Russian Double Strike That Killed a U.S. Medic in Ukraine. 'They Had Us in Sight.'](#) appeared first on [The Wall Street Journal](#).